

1 2 3 4: A Position Statement on Upstate Media Development

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Introduction

The media arts structure of New York State is currently going through an extraordinarily consequential review. On this occasion, a strong Upstate position must be presented to the New York State Council on the Arts--a position which can reflect accurately the Upstate dynamics and deficits which have eventuated from long-term policy neglect.

This paper argues that, to understand the developmental stage of media arts culture in Upstate, one must bear in mind certain key differences between this region and New York City.

Further, an outline is offered of program initiatives which might place New York in a leadership position with respect to the cultivation of alternative (noncommercial) cultural patterns nationwide, during the decade ahead. The alternative to this initiative will be a continuing decay of the Statewide support structure for media art, with (ultimately) decadent consequences for the City as well.

1. Background Presuppositions

The arguments which are developed below have led to the articulation of some unusual positions. It may seem, then, that these arguments are merely veiled expressions of self-interest. Rather, it is our perspective, from within, on the Upstate media environment that has fixed our attention on a few simple and essential presuppositions--and our conclusions follow in course.

First and paramount, we support cultural heterogeneity. It may take one or another form--of indigenous cultural development, of minority or feminist culture, of regionalism or pluralism, of socially motivated variations in cultural standards (say for the hospitalization of the infirm, the academic community, or school children), or of idiosyncratic individualism; in general, we favor a rich cultural "biosphere" over the flattened cultural profile which is best suited to the needs of consumer capitalism.

Second, we think it is appropriate for large-scale cultural developments to be reflected in State funding resources. That is, although there must be support for specialized cultural activities (such as the opera or traditional handicrafts), there should also be support for alternative cultural currents which can reach and affect millions of people. In short, a clear analysis of many peoples' cultural needs is quite properly directed toward a State agency.

Third, we believe most people's inertia requires that opportunities be presented to them over and over; that cultural development begins as part of a process, rather than as an isolated event. For instance, even an eligible grant recipient may not apply the first time they become aware of their opportunity--or the second--or the third.

Fourth, we feel that restrictive applications of the term "art" are inappropriate to the case of film/media. "Art" is usually defined by the hegemony of New York City, to its own purposes--which in effect imposes a proto-colonial model on less developed community culture bases.

2. Defining the Upstate/Downstate Axis

New York City has been the most cosmopolitan and culturally rich arts scene in the world for four decades. People have gone to live there because they can be close to others who live and breathe the interests and discourses in which they share.

Beyond the swirl of these metropolitan influences, in the zip codes 12--, 13--, 14--, New York State feathers out from smaller urban areas into large rural tracts. Europeans can scarcely imagine that the second-largest city, Buffalo, is 600 kilometers from New York. The "communication pressure" of cultural discourse is significantly rarified by geographic

obstacles.

This simple truth has recently led to some rapid and paradoxical changes: the most remote persons (Eskimos, for instance) are increasingly likely to use fax machines, satellite dishes, and such--while a "wild" homeless lifestyle has become a hallmark of urban poverty.

Beyond this, the consumerization of high-tech tools (computers, copy machines, camcorders) has fragmented culture industries that were formerly inaccessible to individual initiatives (publishing, "film" production), putting new communications tools in the hands of even remote persons. Of course, the industries involved have moved to protect their domination of distribution channels.

The distance between access to tools and ideas about what to do with them is the gap which is filled by culture. As for media, the only model most people in 1234 have for "what to do" is provided by TV and movies. This model is at the moment so universally accepted as to create a cultural phalanx out of most people's friends and associates.

In consonance with our initial presuppositions, we assume that it must be a function of State funding to dismantle this homogeneity.

New York City is a richly competitive cultural environment, in which diversity must finally be expressed through the scale of artistic projects. That is, certain persons must have the advantage of financial opportunities that could never be accessible to all. This places artists (and consequently audiences) in close proximity with "tree-market" forces; the terms of capitalist marketing find their way into the fabric of the resultant competition.

Upstate, competition is not yet the issue; the priority is to get started--to develop enough alternatives that the competitiveness of the City might begin to make sense at all. To use a capitalist economic metaphor, culture may be an industry in the City, but it is research and development Upstate--and it still depends heavily on outside support. Culture cannot be delivered Upstate by a system rationalized through standards of product quality, marketing, and audience development.

Individual human development hasn't been measured against adult standards since the twelfth century--"there was no place for childhood in the medieval world." (Philippe Ariès)

We might have room to be scornful of these developmental issues--the backwardness of Upstate--were it not that (1) the political realities of State funding necessitate attention to a broad (Statewide) constituency, and (2) the developmental conditions of Upstate accurately echo conditions across 90% of the US. These two considerations allow us to see a benefit prevailing in the larger picture of New York State, whose unique cultural resource is that it can explore the advantages of having both cultural models. Only in New York State can the role of State funding as a cultural developmental agency be consciously explored and cultivated; New York is cast a: a '90's cultural leader for the US precisely in how it handles Upstate.

3. Pragmatic Observations.

These conclusions emerge in the hindsight of much exposure to cultural development in the Upstate area--

First, unless cultural material directly engages the individual's desire (social or sexual)--as is the case with commercial media--the audience will grow indifferent. People are indifferent unless they are interested; i.e., unless they participate. Core audiences are made of makers.

Second, the initiative and continuity of a few individuals is so key to many Upstate communities' development that a one-year setback can wipe out a whole "scene." In the City, many organizations or people jostle one another; if one or another loses out momentarily, they might manage to hold out for a time through community inertia, or they are shouldered aside by a replacement.

Third, marginal fiefdoms Upstate (that would pass unnoticed in the City) tend to be evaluated by their utility to the New York City arts community, which in effect defines "Art." Hence some Upstate enterprises tend to become City service

agencies--for producers or exhibitors. This colonial activity is a damper on indigenous development.

Fourth, complex communications--as when people meet in person, or through lengthier writings --are substantively different in their impact from the casual communication that typifies most Upstate networking (phone calls, calendar copy exchanges).

4. A Conclusion

Entry-level video making needs to be fostered Upstate for two reasons--

- (1) The range of funding prospects is smaller in 1234 than it is in the City, where some commercially competitive large projects get funded (as described above).

What Upstate cultural development needs to concern itself with is the lower end of the financial support spectrum. In this respect, it assumes a particular relevance that a short (cheap) film is more expensive than a low-budget video--while it is easier to attract audiences to an inexpensive film series than to a low-budget video series. In brief, film and video function in complementary ways with respect to making versus exhibiting. A reflection of this is seen in Upstate organizational trends: a currently successful Upstate film group at the moment is composed of programmers, whereas the video-oriented Upstate Media Conference series has centered on makers.

Comparing "entry-level" aspects of film and video funding, then, clearly suggests that film focus on exhibitions, video on making. Further, we might conclude that the larger cultural changes which we seek will finally be tied to the development of entry-level videomaking.

(2) Large-scale consumer technologies are shaking up the opportunities open to entry-level makers. Camcorders are a dime a dozen, suddenly; entry-level producers are now bottlenecked over access to editing equipment. That is, there is still a need for community leadership both in equipment, and -in providing cultural models, but the ante is lower: a community organization can "play" if it can provide editing. As for exhibition, opportunities at the community level are increasingly specific--that is, the outlet is public access cable television.

Artists' work needs to appear on local public access cable television Upstate, in order to participate in the shaping of a cultural model alternative to commercial television.

5. A Specific Proposal to NYSCA

A clear funding category heading for Upstate Media development is strongly advised. Specific project initiatives funded under this category would include--

1. Entry-level publication. A program to subsidize newsletters and a generally higher level of discussion among makers and media organizations throughout Upstate. Budgets to cover only low-cost duplication, postage, and nominal writer fees (\$10.00/500 words).
2. Materials for the Arts. Programs designed to redistribute surplus equipment at nominal cost. Compare: New York City DCA MFA Program. Equipment and supplies included must conform to utilitarian guidelines (i.e., no archaic equipment, no broken consumer stuff).
3. Artists' residencies. The NYFA-sponsored programs for AIR and for public service simply don't function in Upstate. NYSCA should farm out these operations to an organization that can aggressively promote artist/sponsor matchups.
4. Small-scale public access cable TV programming. Seed funding for the production of original series, and/ or the simple packaging of completed work. Cheap and fast, as compared to the "NO TV & MOVIES" sponsored by Visual Studies Workshop.
5. Organizational development program. Funding for community organizing efforts, for information services concerning "getting your media community organized." The need: for experienced people to reach out to underserved communities by visiting, meeting active and interested individuals, and initiating them into the organizational process (Compare: PARTICIPRTF, MediActive efforts for organizing public access cable).
6. Video rental libraries. Formation and operation of low cost rental collections of independent film and video on tape.
7. Entry-level making. Micro-regrants (in \$200-500 range), community production collaborations, and similar initiatives. Encourage acquisition of simple editing facilities, where no public access cable facility is meaningfully available.

For NYSCA to achieve an adequate working understanding of the Upstate perspective, a one-person satellite office should

be maintained in an Upstate city, perhaps Buffalo, Rochester, Binghamton, or Syracuse.

It is also recommended that an enhanced role for Upstate travel be articulated through new Media Bureau program guidelines, and that this program be aggressively promoted for the purposes of inexpensive intra-State travel :for conferences, visiting artist programs, consultation, exhibitions, etc.).